

# Pontus Limes: Romans in Eastern Black Sea Region

**Sulkhan Mamuladze** (Niko Berdzenishvili Institute of Batumi  
Shota Rustaveli State University)

## INTRODUCTION

The Ponto-Caucasian frontier defence system began functioning after the modernization-reorganization of the entire eastern defensive line by Vespasian (69-79)<sup>1</sup>. 72-76 significant forces began moving on the entire regions of the Roman Empire eastern borders. Created by Vespasian, the Cappadocian complex<sup>2</sup>, which included Colchis, received two legions. These legions were stationed on the Cappadocia-Little Armenia line, at Satala and Melitene<sup>34</sup>.

In Melitene was stationed the Legio XII Fulminata (Lightning) transferred from Syria, and in Satala the newly formed XVI Flavia Firma, which later been replaced by the XV Apollinaris. Satala and Melitene were considered as part of Cappadocia and, from a military-strategic point of view, the main distribution base of Roman forces in the Caucasus under the Cappadocian Legation. To the south of Melitene was beginning the Syrian Limes<sup>5</sup>.

Trabzon was the Rome's hub and the military-economic center in eastern black sea region. From 64 AD it became the main center of the Roman garrison - Classic Pontica. Trabzon get to be starting point of the Roman defence system - the Ponto-Caucasus border line, which included the castellums of Hisos, Rize, Athena, Apsarus, Phasis, and Sebastopolis<sup>6</sup>.

Until the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, the Ponto-Caucasian border line extended only to Sebastopolis. But between the years 132-152, the area of this defence system expanded to Pitsunda. The material and technical provision of the castellums located on the Ponto-Caucasus line was carried out from Trabzon<sup>7</sup>.

It is known that the Romans built temporary wooden fortifications before the construction of permanent, long-lasting castles, 'Pilum Murale'<sup>89</sup>. We assume that it is possible the Romans built the same temporary wooden fortification in Apsarus as Flavius Arian (95-175 AD) mentions in Phasis. According to recent studies the construction of a permanent, long-term fortress in Apsarus begun in the second half of I century. The Apsarus castle over the next two centuries was one of the most significant military center in eastern Black sea region.

During the reign of Hadrian (117-138), as Ariane describes, a permanent 'Castella Murata' type defensive structure was already functioning in Apsarus, with five cohorts stationed there.

The presence of such a significant military force in Apsarus was due to its strategical circumstance. The fort was a main crossroads from the Colchis lowlands to the interior of East Asia Minor and, at the same time, closed the coastline. Its main function was to prevent the nomads of the North Caucasus and to Roman provinces of Minor Asia. The geostrategic importance of Apsarus increased even more from 20-s of second century, when kingdom of Iberia conquered a part of the Colchis coast.

Through the Ponto-Caucasian border defence system,

<sup>1</sup> Bowersock, G.W. 1973: 'Syria under Vespasian' Journal of Roman Studies 63: 133-40

<sup>2</sup> Crow, J.G. 1986: 'A review of the physical remains of the frontiers of Cappadocia' in Freeman, P.W.M., Kennedy, D. (eds), The Defence of the Roman and Byzantine East. Oxford: 77-91

<sup>3</sup> Bennett, J. 2002: 'The Cappadocian frontier: from the Julio-Claudians to Hadrian in Freeman, P.W.M., Bennett, J., Fiema, Z.T., Hoffmann, B. (eds), Limes XVIII. Oxford: 301-12

<sup>4</sup> Sinclair, T. A. 1989: Eastern Turkey: an Architectural and Archaeological Survey III. London

<sup>5</sup> Speidel, M.A. 1998: 'Legio IIII Scythica, its movements and men' in Kennedy, D.L. (ed.), The Roman Army in the East. Ann Arbor MI: 163-204

<sup>6</sup> Dabrowa, E. 1998: The Governors of Roman Syria from Augustus to Septimius Severus.

<sup>7</sup> French, D.H. 1988: Roman Roads and Milestones of Asia Minor 2

<sup>8</sup> Dobson, B. 1986: 'The Roman army: wartime or peacetime army?' in Eck, W., Wolff, H. (eds), Heer und Integrationspolitik. Die römischen Miliärdiplom als historische Quelle. Cologne: 10-25

<sup>9</sup> Fink, R.O. 1971: Roman Military Records on Papyri. Cleveland

which successfully maintain military and economic stability in the region until the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. The attacks of the North Caucasian nomads on the Colchis and other Roman provinces ceased; Piracy and robbery were prevented; the security of the distant provinces of the empire was ensured and the local tribes also came under the real control of Rome.

From the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the Roman border defence system, damaged by the barbarians, was renewed in the Eastern Black Sea region with its usual force, and its functioning lasted until the second half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>10</sup>

## 1. PONTUS LIMES: ROMANS IN EASTERN BLACK SEA REGION

As a result of global foreign expansion, Rome faced a new geopolitical reality. In the east, his immediate neighbour became the powerful kingdom of the Parthian Empire. It was the only strong state bordering Rome<sup>11</sup>. The Parthian Empire did not recognize the Roman claims to world domination and fought for centuries to regain the great legacy of the Achaemenid Empire. The border between Rome and Parthia was crossing the Euphrates River.

The specific political situation near the border of the Euphrates had a huge influence on the Colchis<sup>12</sup>, which from 65 B.C. was involved in the political system of Roman Empire. It is true that Colchis was territorially far from the Euphrates border and was not directly adjacent to the Parthia, but it played a significant role in Roman geopolitics<sup>13</sup>.

Colchis bordered on Armenia, which were the main cause of the Parthian-Roman controversy and the main area of endless wars between them. In the ongoing permanent wars for supremacy in Asia, Colchis had to provide a powerful backing for Rome against the Parthia in the fight for Armenia<sup>14</sup>. In addition, the Eastern Black Sea coast had some strategical-communication significance for the East Black Sea region

and North Caucasus. Due to such a geostrategic position, the political status of Colchis changed several times during the frequent reorganizations carried out by the Romans in order to establish a powerful anti-Parthian large enough buffer zone in the eastern border regions. However, Roman garrisons did not appear in Colchis until the 60s of the 1st century, and the military-political interests of the empire in the region were defended by the kingdom of Pontus<sup>15</sup>.

From 63 of the 1st century Emperor Nero (54-68 AD) finally rejected the system of "buffer" states and abolished the Pontus kingdom. Its territory, along with Colchis, was annexed to the province of Galatia. At the same time, the Bosphorus kingdom was influenced under the direct protection of Rome. Roman garrisons were stationed on the Crimea and the Caucasus coast by Nero's decree. According to Flavius Josephus (37-95 AD), the aims of the empire in South and East Black Sea region were defended by 3,000 heavily armed warriors and a fleet of 40 ships. As it turns out, these ships belonged to Raven's squad. It is documented that at the time of Nero, Roman garrisons were stationed on the Colchis coast at three points - Apsarus, Phasis and Sebastopolis<sup>16</sup>.

It is well known that before the construction of permanent, stationary military camps-castellums, Romans built the 'Pila muralia', temporary wooden fortifications. Remains of similar wooden structures have been found in Britain, the Netherlands, and the Rhine-Danube region. They are predominantly typical for the 1st century AD. It seems that even in the coastal areas of Colchis, the Romans had to build temporary fortifications of this kind of wood. In any case, this is not in doubt as far as Flavius Arian (95-175 AD)<sup>17</sup> is concerned, the wall of the first-century fortress of Phasis was made of clay and wooden towers stood on it. However, the Roman empire seems to have soon begun to modernize the fortification system of the eastern Black Sea.

The reorganization of the Roman border-defence system of the Eastern Black Sea, as well as of the whole of Asia Minor, is associated with the name of Emperor Vespasian (69-79 AD)<sup>18</sup>. In 72 AD, in order to increase the defence capabilities of the eastern borders, the provinces of Galatia and Cappadocia were united and

<sup>10</sup> Luttwak, E.N. 1976: *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire: from the First Century AD to the Third*. Baltimore

<sup>11</sup> Edwards N. Luttwak. *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire. From the First Century A.D. to the Third*. Baltimore. 1981, pp. 192-193; Tedo Dundua, Nino Silagadze. *European Industrial Complexes of I Cycle of Capitalism and the Georgian Western Affiliations. Historical and Numismatic Tale*. Tb. 2005, pp. 5-7;

<sup>12</sup> Crow, J.G., French, D.H. 1980: 'New research on the Euphrates frontier in Turkey' in Hanson, W.S., Keppie, L.J.F. (eds), *Roman Frontier Studies XII*. Oxford: 903-13a

<sup>13</sup> Braund, D. 1996: 'River frontiers in the environmental psychology of the Roman world' in Kennedy, D.L. (ed.), *The Roman Army in the East*. Ann Arbor MI: 43-47

<sup>14</sup> Blockley, R. 1987: 'The division of Armenia between the Romans and the Persians at the end of the fourth century AD' *Historia* 36: 222-34

<sup>15</sup> Mitford, T.B. 1974: 'Some inscriptions from the Cappadocian Limes' *Journal of Roman Studies* 64: 160-75

<sup>16</sup> Lekvinadze 1969, 87; Kiguradze / Lordkipanidze / Todua 1987; Speidel 1992, 204-208; Mamuladze / Khalvashii / Aslanishvili 2002, 34-35; Kakhidze 2008, 313, figs. 19 and 20; Gamkrelidze, 2014, 11-15; Karasiewicz-Szczypiorski / Mamuladze, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Bosworth, A.B. 1971: 'Arrian and the Alani' *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 81: 217-55

<sup>18</sup> French, D.H., Lightfoot, C. (eds) 1989: *The Eastern Frontier of the Roman Empire*. Oxford

established the Cappadocian Limes"<sup>19</sup>. Colchis also included the Limes. The establishment of the Cappadocian Limes was due to the complication of the circumstance on the eastern borders of Roman Empire, which was caused by the activation of the nomadic tribes of the Alans, the actual loss of Roman influence in Armenia and the impending threat from the Parthian Kingdom<sup>20</sup>.

The importance of Cappadocia as a border province was especially heightened by the fact that in the same year 72, Vespasian abolished the 'buffer' kingdoms of Little Armenia and Commagene. Consequently, huge attention was paid to the fortification of the Cappadocian border line. The Cappadocian Limes received two legions stationed directly near the border, Cappadocia - on the line of Little Armenia, Satala and Melitene. The XII Fulminata (Lightning) Legion from Syria was deployed in Melitene, and the recently formed XVI Flavia Firma in Satala, which was later replaced by the XV Apollinaris Legion transferred from Pannonia.

The last part of the Upper Euphrates border-defence system was Satala and Melitene. They were considered to be the main distribution base of Roman military units in Cappadocia and, in military-strategic terms, under the command of the Cappadocian commander-in-chief in the Transcaucasia (currently five Roman fortresses have been identified on the Satala-Trabzon region)<sup>21</sup>. The Syrian Limes began south of Melitene, while Satala was connected to Trabzon by a network of fortifications. From this last point originated the next Roman frontier-defence system, which controlled the whole of Colchis. This system also began functioning actively in the Vespasian era<sup>22,23</sup>.

Trabzon was the basis of Rome's Caucasian policy and an important military-political and economic center of the region. From 64 AD, it became the main base of the Roman fleet - Classic Pontica. Later, parts of the Classic Pontica had to be stationed in the harbours of Colchis. The material and technical provision of the castellums located on the border of the Eastern Black Sea coast was supplied from Trabzon.

To the east of Trabzon, on the seashore, small garrisons were stationed at Hisos, Rize, and Athena. In addition to these points, 63 AD years later, Roman garrisons were stationed at Apsarus, Phasis, and Sebastopolis. Until the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, Sebastopolis was the farthest outpost of Roman Eastern

Empire in the north western Caucasus. Between 132 and 152 AD, military garrisons were stationed in Pitius, thus completing the organizational modification of the Ponto-Caucasian border.

The main purpose of the Ponto-Caucasian border system was to strengthen Rome's positions in the region, to restrain the expansion of Iberian kingdom to the coast, to control the crossings of the North Caucasus. In addition to its strategic functions, its responsibilities included fighting piracy and securing trade.

The geopolitical importance of Colchis increased exponentially at the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, when Emperor Trajan (98-117 AD)<sup>24</sup> began preparations for an expedition against Parthia-Armenia. The Eastern Black Sea coast was a favourable strategic area for Armenia and, if necessary, the Romans could invade Armenia from here as well. In addition, Roman garrisons fighting in Armenia were supplied with food and additional forces from the Black Sea, mainly from Trabzon.

It seems that some changes should have taken place in the Ponto-Caucasian border system during Trajan's time. Given the strategic importance of the Meotida-Colchis route, and especially the harbour of Trabzon, it is possible that Trajan placed additional forces in the Roman forts on the eastern Black Sea coast.

After the Eastern campaign of Trajan, the foreign policy of Rome formed during the reign of Hadrian (117-138 AD). The empire exhausted all resources for beginning any of global wars and was forced to move to total defenses along the entire areas of the borders. Adrian renounced the provinces established by Trajan in the territories of Armenia and the Parthia, and returned to the Euphrates frontier, although the Parthian kingdom was unable to take advantage of the situation. After defeat during Trajan's campaign, he also found no strength to go on the counterattack in former Asia.

In 129, Emperor Hadrian personally visited to Cappadocia, where he also visited Trabzon when he visited the province. It seems that after Hadrian became acquainted with the situation on the ground, the modernization of the Roman border-defence system of the Eastern Black Sea began. 131 During a business trip to the Black Sea coast by Flavius Arrian, Consul of the Province of Cappadocia, the process of upgrading and strengthening Roman outposts along the Trabzon-Sebastopolis line was not yet complete. The construction of the port, which began under Adrian's order, was still going on in Trabzon.

According to Arrian, Apsarus looked particularly impressive from the Roman forts of the eastern Black Sea. Apsarus has long been identified with present-day Gonio<sup>25</sup>. The castle is surprisingly well preserved. It is

<sup>19</sup> Mitford, T.B. 1980: 'Cappadocia and Armenia Minor: historical setting of the Limes' *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* 2.7.2: 1169-228

<sup>20</sup> Matthews, R. (ed.) 1998: *Ancient Anatolia*

<sup>21</sup> Mitford, T.B. 1998: 'The Roman frontier on the upper Euphrates' in Matthews, R. (ed.), *Ancient Anatolia*. London: 254-72

<sup>22</sup> Isaac, B. 1992: *The Limits of Empire: the Roman Frontier in the East*

<sup>23</sup> Kennedy, D.L. (ed.) 1996: *The Roman Army in the East*

<sup>24</sup> Keppie, L.F.J. 1986: 'Legions in the East from Augustus to Trajan' in Freeman

<sup>25</sup> Weber, E. (ed.) 1976: *Tabula Peutingeriana*

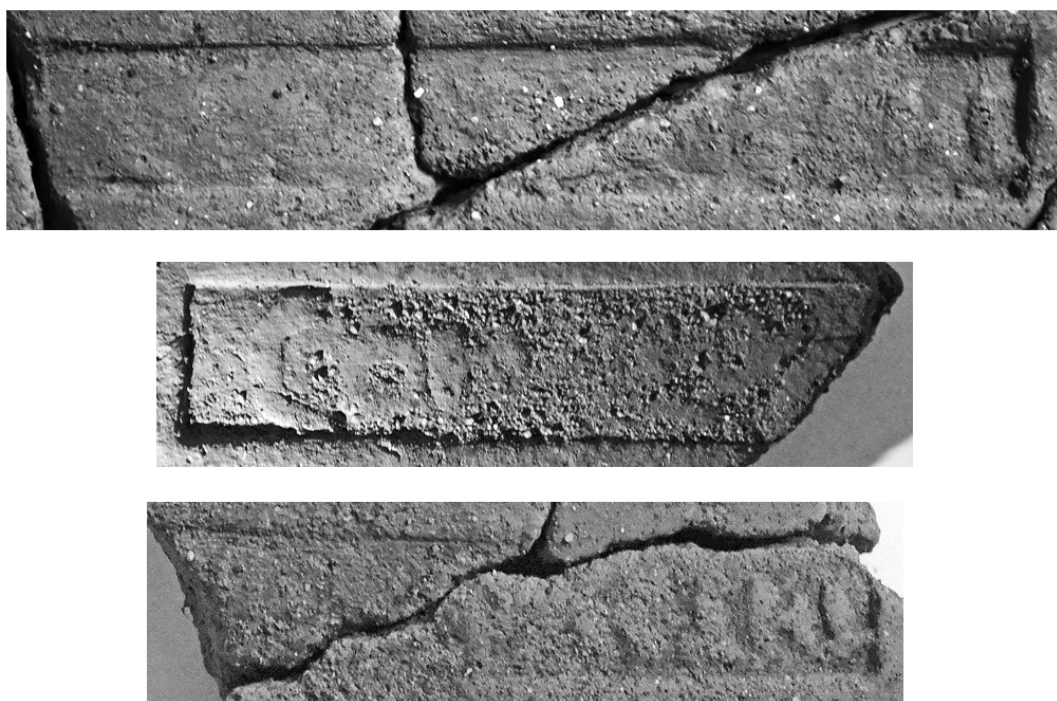
rectangular in plan, with towers and a castle fence showing traces of multiple restorations. During the reign of Emperor Hadrian, Apsarus had the strongest Roman garrison in the eastern Black Sea coast.

## 2. A RECENT TILE STAMP IMPRESSIONS FROM APSARUS FORT

Imprints of stamps on ceramic building materials were found at or near most garrison places of the Roman garrisons in Colchis.<sup>26</sup> Recent archaeological researches and a study of the surviving epigraphic materials from the Roman fort of Apsarus that was established under Nero on the Southern Colchian coast has revealed recent stamp impressions and led to revised readings of previously known specimens<sup>27,28</sup>.

adjacent to it (some also with fragmentary stamp impressions), discovered during previous expeditions, belong to the same destruction layer. The distribution of this debris indicates that the collapsed roof was never cleared away and therefore that the room it once covered (and most probably the entire building) was no longer in use when the roof came down. Thus, this entire layer consists of debris from the collapsed roof of the early second-century praetorium, parts of which fell into the building while others dropped to the ground just outside<sup>29</sup>.

Unfortunately, the Roman ceramics from Apsarus usually have an eroded or softened surface due to chemical reactions with the local soil. When excavating tiles in this state, it is therefore very easy to overlook fragmented or badly preserved imprints on their surfaces.



**Fig. 1.** Recent stamp imprints from Apsarus

The latest stamp imprints were found during 2017-2018 Archaeological expeditions in Apsarus. These damaged tiles belong to the remains of the praetorium that was built during the first decades of the second century. The stratigraphy reveals that other roof tiles covering the Roman time 'mosaic' and the area ad-

It was thus possible to identify 8 fragmentary impressions of a Latin stamp impression. This includes one specimen, which could be put together from three fragments and which, although in part badly abraded, preserves some letters and the complete dimensions (fig. 2A). The original impression thus has the shape of a simple rectangle of 146 × 22 mm. It helped to identify all the other fragmentary impressions as products of the same die. With the complete outline at hand and the known position of some of the letters, it was possible to reconstruct the original imprint (fig. 2):

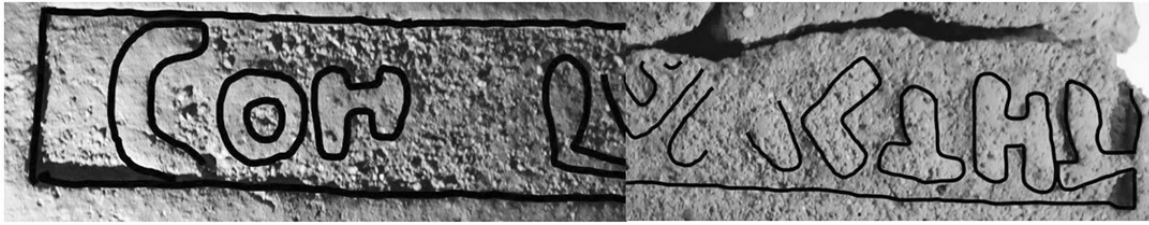
<sup>26</sup> Lekvinadze 1969, 87; Kiguradze / Lordkipanidze / Todua 1987; Speidel 1992, 204-208; Mamuladze / Khalvashi / Aslanishvili 2002, 34-35; Kakhidze 2008, 313, figs. 19 and 20; Gamkrelidze 2014, 11-15.

<sup>27</sup> Lander, J. 1984: *Roman Stone Fortifications: Variation and Change from the First Century to the Fourth*. Oxford

<sup>28</sup> Speidel, M.P. 1983a: 'The Roman army in Asia Minor: recent epigraphical discoveries and research' in Mitchell, S. (ed.), *Armies and Frontiers in Roman and Byzantine Anatolia*. Oxford: 7-34

<sup>29</sup> Karasiewicz-Szczypiorski, R., Mamuladze Sh., Speidel M.A. *New and Revised tile Stamps from the Roman fort of Apsarus (Gonio, Georgia)*. 2022.





**Fig. 2.** The complete recent stamp impression (According to Karasiewicz-Szczypiorski, R., Mamuladze Sh., Speidel M.A. *New and Revised tile Stamps from the Roman fort of Apsaros*)

With the help of such fragments, it is possible to arrange a composite image of the complete original stamp impression (fig. 2):

The inscription takes up one line and consists of 10 visible Latin letters and symbols. The first 3 letters clearly read COH (fig. 2 A–B) and appear to be followed by a gap. A punctuation mark or a number may have stood here. The following group of 4 letters appears to read LVMC, with the right hasta of the V “leaning” on the left hasta of the M. From the middle of the right, oblique hasta of the V, a small vertical stem with a slightly circular end seems to be rising (fig. 2 B–C). Its meaning is unclear. Perhaps it is a clumsy or failed attempt at inserting a short horizontal stroke over the numeral V, or the result of a random local damage to the die’s surface. The three final letters resemble THT written upside-down (fig. 2 A and C). All surviving impressions appear to stem from the same die. Thus, the letters of the new stamp impressions can be read (cf. fig. 2):

COH [.] LVMC⊥H⊥

The Latin letters and the find spot firmly establish a military context. Hence, COH is no doubt to be read *coh(ors)* or perhaps rather *coh(ortis)*, with the genitive indicating the cohort’s ownership or production of the tiles. The next four letters seem to refer to *le-*

*gio V Macedonica* and can be read *l(egionis) V Māc(edonicae)*, probably with MA in ligature (unless *M(a) c(edonicae)* was intended). At any rate, similar stamp impressions of *legio V Macedonica* are well attested. The position of the V, which is “leaning” on the M, recalls other stamps of *legio V Macedonica* (fig. 4):

Typically, stamps with both terms *cohors* and *legio* appear on bricks and tiles at sites that lie far away from the legions’ base camps and were therefore produced by detached cohorts. In nearly all known cases the term *legio* takes pride of place and *cohors* is followed by an ordinal number. Thus, for instance, such tiles of *legio V Macedonica* bear the following inscriptions:<sup>30</sup>

- *l(egionis) V Māc(edonica) coh(ortis) I* [–] – (Ivanov 2017, p 91b: Variana, Moesia Inferior)
- *l(egionis) V M(acedonicae) c(ohortis) II* – (AE 2002, 1237a4: Romuliana, Moesia Superior. AE 2016, 1357b: Almus, Moesia Inferior)
- *l(egionis) V M(acedonica) c(ohortis) III* – (AE 1944, 66: Sucidava, Dacia. AE 2002, 1237a5: Romuliana. Moesia Superior)
- *l(egionis) V M(acedonica) c(ohortis) IIII* – (AE 1976, 582b. ILD 117da. 117db: Sucidava, Dacia. AE 2002, 01237a6: Romuliana, Moesia Superior)
- *l(egionis) V M(acedonica) c(ohortis) V* – (AE 2002, 1237a7: Romuliana. Moesia Superior)



**Fig. 3.** Stamp of *l(egio) V M(acedonica)* from Potaissa, Dacia (P. Pilhofer, CC BY-SA 3.0)

<sup>30</sup> Cf. also AE 1115b (Transdrobeta, Moesia Superior): *leg(ionis) V Māc(edonica) I coh(ors)*.



Fig. 4. 1 and 2 Fragmentary tile stamps of legio XV Apollinaris



Fig. 5. Tile stamps of legio XV Apollinaris from Satala (from Mitford 1997, 142 nos. 5 and 2)

### 3. LEGIO XV APOLLINARIS AT APSARUS CASTELLUM

A survey of the archaeological materials from Apsarus Museum fund turned up two previously unpublished fragmentary tile stamps (fig. 4). Unfortunately, these are finds from earlier excavations at Gonio-Apsarus, and there was no information to be found concerning their exact find spot and stratigraphic context. In both cases, the right end of a stamp impression survives with the last two letters of the inscription [-] OL:

The military nature of the find spot and the Latin letters leave little doubt that we are dealing with fragments of tile stamps produced by a military unit. Most likely, this was *legio XV Apollinaris*, the legion stationed nearest to Apsarus. This legion was transferred to Satala in Armenia Minor (and thus to the command of the Roman governor of Cappadocia) at the beginning of Hadrian's reign, and is still attested there at the end of the fourth century.<sup>31</sup> At its base at Satala, the legion produced similar tile stamps reading LEG XV APOL (fig. 6).<sup>32</sup>

The most likely reading of the fragments from Apsarus is therefore [*leg(ionis) XV Ap(ol)linaris*]<sup>33</sup>. Stamp impressions with the same succession of letters are well known from sites on the Danube where they are related to the legion's 1st c. and early 2<sup>nd</sup> c. stay at Carnuntum<sup>34</sup>. The vast majority of stamps the legion produced in the East, however, merely read LEG XV (or LEG XV A).<sup>35</sup> These were still produced and used in Colchis in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> and early 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries.<sup>36,37</sup> One might therefore speculate that the legion's stamps from the East reading LEG XV APOL date to the earlier phases of its stay at Satala. Be that as it may, the hitherto unattested (but hardly surprising) presence of a group of soldiers from *legio XV Apollinaris* in the 2<sup>nd</sup> (/ 3<sup>rd</sup>) century AD at Apsarus is a welcome addition to the history of this legion and its involvement in Colchian affairs.

<sup>31</sup> ND or. 38,13. Cf. Wheeler 2000: 282–295. Strobel 2019, 448 with n. 10. Contrary to Ritterling 1925: 1457, CIL III 13630 (Satala) does not attest a new legion (*legio II Armeniaca*) at Satala: see Mitford 1997, 147f. n. 12. Speidel 2009 b, 599 with n. 19.

<sup>32</sup> Mitford 1997: 142, nos. 6: 2 and 5. Mitford 2018: 538, no. 64.

<sup>33</sup> Duch, M. 2017, Stamps on Bricks and Tiles from Novae. Outline of Chronology. Novensia 28, 99–119.

<sup>34</sup> Wheeler, E.L. 2000: 'Legio XV Apollinaris' in Le Bohec, Y., Wolff, C. (eds), *Les Légions de Rome sous le haut-empire*. Paris: 258–308.

<sup>35</sup> Mitford 1997: 142, nos. 6: 3, 4, 6 and 7–10. Mitford 2018, 551 n. 103. Gamkrelidze 2014, 17.

<sup>36</sup> Tomlin, R. S. O. 1992, RIB 2459–2463. Legionary Tile-Stamps: Introduction. Oxford, 125–127.

<sup>37</sup> 33 Lekvinadze 1969, 87. Kiguradze / Lordkipanidze / Todua 1987, 88. Wheeler 2000, 303f. Speidel 2009b, 604. Mitford 2018, 551n. 103. Karasiewicz et alii 2018, 489–490.

#### 4. THE ROMAN GARRISONS IN APSARUS CASTELLUM AS PART OF PONTUS LIMES

It is generally held that Rome attributed great strategic importance to Apsarus during the late 1st and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries. However, the presently available evidence for the strength and composition of Apsarus' garrison during the second and third centuries is limited to records of two episodes during the reign of Hadrian. Thus, when the governor of Cappadocia, L. Flavius Arrian, visited Apsarus in ca. 131 AD, he recorded the local presence of five cohorts.<sup>38</sup> An inscription from Abella (modern Avella) in Italy reveals that a force of presumably similar nature was under the command of one N. Marcius Plaetorius Celer, *primuspilus* of *legio I Adiutrix* a few years earlier: *praepositus numerorum tendentium in Ponto Absaro*.<sup>47</sup> Unfortunately, it has so far not been possible to establish the identity of any of these units or to trace any details of Apsarus' military history over any significant length of time.

The new and revised tile stamps from Apsarus presented above are therefore a very welcome addition to the previously available literary, epigraphic and archaeological data. They reveal soldiers of the following five units to have at least temporarily been part of the second-century garrison of Apsarus:

- *Legio V Macedonica*
- *Legio XV Apollinaris*
- *Cohors Aurelia c(ivium) R(omanorum)*  
∞ (*milliaria*)
- *Cohors ∞ (milliaria) equitum c(ivium)*  
*R(omanorum)*
- *Cohors III (Syrorum) sagittariorum (?)*

If the reconstructions and readings of the stamp impressions presented above are correct, no local documentary sources remains for a *cohors II Claudiana* at Apsarus, which most researchers have so far counted among its garrison. Soldiers of *legio V Macedonica* and *cohors III sagittariorum* appear to have supplied ceramic building material for the early second-century *praetorium*, and a detachment of *legio XV Apollinaris* may also have been present at some point during the first half of the second century. Yet none of these units and detachments can be firmly related with the garrisons mentioned by Arrian<sup>39</sup>.

A long-lasting garrison of 5 cohorts would have made Apsarus one of the most powerful strongholds in the eastern Black Sea frontier, excepting, of course, the legionary fortresses. By analogy, Apsarus has therefore been compared to the Roman fort at Syene on Egypt's border with Nubia, where, according to Strabo and the documentary evidence, three auxiliary cohorts were permanently stationed "as a guard to that region" (φρουρὰ τοῖς τόποις).<sup>40</sup> However, it is not certain whether Apsarus' military garrison was permanently of extraordinary size or whether it was just temporarily increased due to regional political and military tensions during the reign of Hadrian. In fact, not long ago it has even been suggested that Arrian's mentioned five cohorts were merely the result of a scribal error, and that Apsarus' "sole significance lay in affording the last safe anchorage before the hazardous mouth of the Acampsis River" (albeit not as a base of the *classic Pontica*). Yet denying the strategic role of the fort at Apsarus altogether is unwarranted and clearly goes too far. The evidence presented above rather betrays Rome's significant interest in the region throughout the entire second century and supports the view that it judged Apsarus to have been of strategic importance. Though, many questions remain and it is therefore to be hoped that future studies will provide further information on the history of East Black Sea region Roman time forts and this remote part of the Roman world.

<sup>38</sup> Speidel 2009b, 606 and 619–620. Eck and Pangerl 2014, 244.

<sup>39</sup> Karasiewicz-Szczypiorski, R., Mamuladze Sh., Speidel M.A. New and Revised tile Stamps from the Roman fort of Apsaros (Gonio, Georgia). 2022.

<sup>40</sup> Strabo 17,1,12. 17,1,53 and CIL III 14147,2. Cf. Speidel 1984, 283. Speidel 1992, 243ff., esp. 247



## References

- Bennett, J. 2002: 'The Cappadocian frontier: from the Julio-Claudians to Hadrian in Freeman, P.W.M., Bennett, J., Fiema, Z.T., Hoffmann, B. (eds), *Limes XVIII*. Oxford: 301
- Bowersock, G.W. 1973: 'Syria under Vespasian' *Journal of Roman Studies* 63: 133
- Braund, D. 1994, *Georgia in Antiquity. A History of Colchis and Transcaucasian Iberia 550 BC-AD 562*. Oxford. Christodoulou, D. N. 2002, Galerius, Gamzigrad, and the Fifth Macedonian Legion. *JRA* 15, 275-281.
- Braund, D. 1996: 'River frontiers in the environmental psychology of the Roman world' in Kennedy, D.L. (ed.), *The Roman Army in the East*. Ann Arbor MI: 43-47
- Crow, J.G. 1986: 'A review of the physical remains of the frontiers of Cappadocia' in Freeman, P.W.M., Kennedy, D. (eds), *The Defence of the Roman and Byzantine East*. Oxford: 77-91
- Dabrowa, E. 1998: *The Governors of Roman Syria from Augustus to Septimius Severus*
- Dobson, B. 1986: 'The Roman army: wartime or peacetime army?' in Eck, W., Wolff, H. (eds), *Heer und Integrationspolitik. Die römischen Miliärdiplom als historische Quelle*. Cologne: 10-25
- Duch, M. 2017, Stamps on Bricks and Tiles from Novae. *Outline of Chronology*. *Novensia* 28, 99-119.
- Edwards N. Luttwak. *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire. From the First Century A.D. to the Third*. Baltimore. 1981, 192-193;
- Fink, R.O. 1971: *Roman Military Records on Papyri*. Cleveland
- French, D.H. 1988: *Roman Roads and Milestones of Asia Minor 2*
- French, D. H. 1990 b, *The Legio V Macedonica in Northern Asia Minor*. In: M. Sağlam / B. Kodaman / J.-L. Bacqué-Grammont / M. A. Ünal / M. Özbalcı (eds), *ikinci Uluslararası Tarih Boyunca Karadeniz Kongresi Bildirileri, 1-3 Haziran 1988 / Congrès international sur la mer Noire, du 1er au 3 juin 1988 à Samsun*. Samsun, 555-561.
- Gamkrelidze, G. 2014, *Archaeology of Roman Period of Georgia (Iberia-Colchis)*. Essay and Catalogue. Tbilisi.
- Giardina, A. 1996, *Roma e il Caucaso*. In: *Il Caucaso: cerniera fra culture del Mediterraneo alla Persia (secoli IV-XI)*. Spoleto, 85-141.
- Ivanov, R. T. 2017, *Building Ceramics from Variana*. In: idem (ed.), *Between Danube and Haemus Mountain (1st-6th c. A.D.)*. Sofia, 86-97.
- Kakhidze, E. 2008, *Apsaros: A Roman Fort in Southwestern Georgia*. In: P. G. Bilde / J. H. Petersen (eds), *Meetings of Cultures in the Black Sea Region: Between Conflict and Coexistence*. Aarhus, 303-332.
- Karasiewicz-Szczypiorski, R. 2016, *Apsaros. Early Headquarters Building (principia). New Location?* *Pro Georgia* 26, 53-63.
- Karasiewicz-Szczypiorski, R. / Mamuladze, S. 2019, *Early Fortifications at Apsaros Fort (Gonio, Georgia)*. *New Discoveries*. *Pro Georgia* 29, 63-76.
- Karasiewicz-Szczypiorski, R., Mamuladze Sh., Speidel M.A. *New and Revised tile Stamps from the Roman fort of Apsaros (Gonio, Georgia)*. 2022.
- Kennedy, D. 1985, *The Composition of a Military Work Party in Roman Egypt (ILS 2483: Coptos)*. *IEA* 71, 156-160.
- Kennedy, D.L. (ed.) 1996: *The Roman Army in the East*. Oxford
- Lekvinadze, V. A. 1969, *Pontijskij limes*. *VDI* 108, 75-93
- Luttwak, E.N. 1976: *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire: from the First Century AD to the Third*. Baltimore
- Mamuladze, Sh., Khalvashi, M., Aslanishvili, L., 2002, *Rimskie garnizony Apsara*. *VDI* 1, 33-39.
- Mitford, T.B. 1974: 'Some inscriptions from the Cappadocian Limes' *Journal of Roman Studies* 64: 160-75
- Mitford, T.B. 1980: 'Cappadocia and Armenia Minor: historical setting of the Limes' *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* 2.7.2: 1169-228
- Mitford, T. B. 1997, *The Inscriptions of Satala (Armenia Minor)*. *ZPE* 115, 137-167.
- Mitford, T. B. 2018, *East of Asia Minor. Rome's Hidden Frontier*. Oxford.
- Sinclair, T. A. 1989: *Eastern Turkey: an Architectural and Archaeological Survey III*. London
- Speidel, M.A. 1998: 'Legio IIII Scythica, its movements and men' in Kennedy, D.L. (ed.), *The Roman Army in the East*. Ann Arbor MI: 163-204
- Speidel, M. A. 2009, *The Development of the Roman Forces in Northeastern Anatolia*. In: M. A. Speidel, *Heer und Herrschaft im Römischen Reich der Hohen Kaiserzeit*. Stuttgart, 595-631.
- Tomlin, R. S. O. 1992, *RIB 2459-2463. Legionary Tile-Stamps: Introduction*. Oxford, 125-127.